

# THE OLD-FASHIONED GIFT

Drawings by W. Hottinger

By KATHARINE HOLLAND BROWN



"Slowly, reverently, he read the grave, majestic words."



WELL! The world is growing better every day," J. Channing Sears, my estimable middle-aged son-in-law, looked up from his Transcript. "Here is another superb benefaction. Hyland, of the Tin Can Trust, sets aside fifteen millions, half his entire fortune, for a permanent Foundation—investigation of poverty in manufacturing centers—committee of thirty—funds available—Um! Magnificent, really! Well, perhaps not better, every day,—when you look at poor Europe,—but at least more generous. Who ever heard of such lavish giving in your time, Mother?"

"Who, indeed?" said I meekly. "Back in your young days I doubt whether the idea of deliberately giving half his wealth to his fellow citizens ever entered a rich man's head," J. Channing went on. Sometimes, when J. Channing's voice rolls out that loud, orotund note, I forget that he's forty-nine and bald-headed and an eminent corporation lawyer, and it's all I can do not to cuff his eminent ears—"or a poor man's head, either. Many people allude to the last ten years as our era of moral awakening. I should call it our era of moral action. The impulse to give wisely, broadly, above all bountifully, seems reserved for this generation alone."

"No doubt," said I. The stuffing old hypocrite I am! "In short, public records of fifty years ago cannot give a single case of generosity like this." "Private records might," I ventured humbly. "I doubt it. The Puritan character had its own nobilities of thought and act; but whole-souled giving was not one of them." "Very like you're right," said I. I stared at my dancing hearth fire. I am seventy-six years old, going on seventy-seven. I have five children, four children-in-law, and nineteen grandchildren. Needless to add, I learned long since to say, "Very like you're right," and

let it go at that. But I was mighty roily inside. To pacify myself I looked deeper and deeper into that blazing glow. Through that magic gate of flame I looked away, away to my misty girlhood, spent in a lonely pioneer cabin, in the gray days before the war. J. Channing was a little too complacent. All the true benefactors have not made their boons in terms of millions and Foundations. Far down that long dim path, far in those harsh mid-century times of labor and poverty and self-denial, I saw another royal gift, another thrice-royal giver. Let me tell you the story of those other days:

NOW mind you don't scrimp on yourself, Father," said my little stepmother with gentle authority. "Soon's you reach the city go straight to the best store, and buy the best overcoat you can find, even if it takes all the thirty dollars you got for the wood lot." "Very well, Louisa."

"And don't spend a penny for me, nor for the little boys. Remember, it's twelve years since you bought your last overcoat. You want the finest cloth that money can buy." "Very well, Louisa." Father went on soberly packing his catfish-mouthed old carpetbag. He folded in socks and neckerchiefs and a large yellow flannel nightgown, and three frilled and plaited homespun shirts. Lastly he tucked in a pudgy Testament and a huge old-fashioned pepperbox revolver. I stood waiting, already caparisoned. Today, aged thirteen, I was to make my first journey into the wide world, and my heart was nigh dancing out of my breast. My three little brothers gazed on me, rapt. Going to Cincinnati! Going to ride all day and sleep all night on a steamboat, and that steamboat the *Mattie Lee*!

"You take good care of Father, Mary Caroline." Mother crammed one more mince turnover into our lunch basket. In a lower tone, "I do wish he could afford a suit of store clothes too." She glanced at Father

in his spotless baggy old broadcloth. Her patient eyes kindled. "When we were married he had him an elegant new suit, and a greatcoat, all the way from Boston. Your father was a fine figure of a man in those days."

Father strapped his bag. He stood up very straight. He was a fine figure of a man even now, I thought proudly,—tall, lean, eagle-featured, with the black-hooded brows and the dour-thrust jaw of every Stafford since Noll Cromwell's day. A silent man, my father; strict and aloof; just,—ah, grimly just!—yet a judge whose edicts were tempered with mercy; a father whose deep heart was a well of tenderness unfailing.

"Come, Children." Father sat down and reached a gnarled hand for the great Bible on the light stand. A swift hush fell upon the little room.

"For worship this morning," he said at length in his slow, thinking voice, "I will read from the seventh chapter of Saint Matthew."

Slowly, reverently, he read the grave, majestic words. Quiet as mice we children sat, dutiful eyes fixed on the Book. But I heard only snatches; for all the marvels of the coming journey were gleaming before my eyes. Finally one sentence caught my ear:

If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?

Right there Father stopped short. He had a horrifying trick of stopping midway in a text, and pouncing on us children for explanation.

"If we earthly fathers, being evil—Seth, my son, what does Saint Matthew mean by that?"

Seth gulped. His apple face grew blank as a fresh-baked apple pie. "Do know, Sir?"

"Lucius?"

Lucius' eyes widened. Helplessly he shook his head. "Thomas?"

Little tow-headed Thomas bounced violently on